



## Ethnic identity: Evidence of protective effects for young, Latino children



Maria Serrano-Villar <sup>\*,1</sup>, Esther J. Calzada <sup>2</sup>

New York University School of Medicine, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 29 December 2014

Received in revised form 2 November 2015

Accepted 6 November 2015

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Latino children

Ethnic identity

Early childhood

Behavioral

Protective factors

### ABSTRACT

This study examined ethnic identity development and its association with child functioning among 4–5 year old Latino children. Six hundred seventy-four Mexican and Dominican American children participated in an ethnic identity interview, and teachers and mothers reported on children's externalizing, internalizing and adaptive behavior functioning. Results are consistent with social identity developmental theory in suggesting that ethnic identity is emerging at this young age. Moreover, various components of ethnic identity were associated with better adaptive behavior and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems, particularly as reported by teachers. Findings were robust across child gender and ethnicity (i.e., country of origin). During early childhood, ethnic identity may be an important protective factor that can promote the behavioral functioning of Latino children.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Research on the ethnic identity of minority youth has proliferated over the past two decades, in tandem with a growing interest in identifying sources of resilience among children and adolescents at risk for negative developmental outcomes (Kuperminc, Wilkins, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2013; Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013). For Latino youth, mounting evidence suggests that ethnic identity, or one's sense of belonging and commitment to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 2003), may indeed be protective (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). To date, this research is guided by the view of ethnic identity formation as a developmental task of adolescence, when issues of identity and self-concept become highly salient and individual socialization experiences within the family and larger community lead to the acceptance or rejection of one's ethnicity or nationality (Phinney, 2003). Less attention has been given to the formation and potential protective effects of ethnic identity during early childhood, when developmental trajectories begin to take shape. The overarching aim of the present study was to examine ethnic identity and its association with child functioning among young Latino children at high risk for later mental health and academic problems.

### Latino youth in the US

According to a number of national surveys, Latinos initiate and engage in risky behaviors, such as carrying a weapon, getting into fights,

smoking, drinking and using illicit drugs, at earlier ages and more often compared with other groups of adolescents (Eaton et al., 2008). Moreover, Latina girls have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of any ethnic group, with more than half of Latinas bearing a child before the age of 20 (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009), while Latino boys enter the juvenile justice system at disproportionately high rates (Sickmund & Snyder, 1999). These disquieting statistics are based on pan-ethnic (predominately Mexican-origin) samples without consideration of specific ethnicity, but a small literature suggests that, consistent with adult studies (e.g., Alegria et al., 2007), some subgroups (Mexican Americans, Dominican Americans and Puerto Ricans in particular) fare worse than others (Bettes, Dusenbury, Kerner, James-Ortiz, & Botvin, 1990). Such variations in developmental trajectories are thought to reflect the tremendous heterogeneity of the Latino population.

Though united by a shared pan-ethnic categorization, the more than 50 million Latinos in the US come from different ethnic (e.g., Mexican, Dominican, Colombian) and racial (i.e., white, black, indigenous) groups. Nonetheless, Latino heterogeneity is understudied, in part because although race and ethnicity are theoretically distinct (race refers to the physical, biological and genetic make-up of a group, while ethnicity refers to social grouping based on shared language, values, customs, etc.), they are often used interchangeably in the literature. This may reflect the confound between race and ethnicity that exists in certain groups (e.g., African Americans are racially black, Chinese Americans are racially Asian), but such overlap is less clear in the Latino population. For example, Latinos from Mexico, who represent the largest group in the US, are primarily mestizo (mixed white and indigenous race) but may be of white or indigenous race, and Latinos from the Dominican Republic, the 5th largest group in the US, are primarily mulatto (mixed white and black race) but may be of white or black race. Importantly, though, Latinos may not identify with either

\* Corresponding author at: Research Fellow, Child Study Center, New York University School of Medicine, One Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States.

E-mail address: Maria.Serrano-Villar@nyumc.org (M. Serrano-Villar).

<sup>1</sup> Maria Serrano-Villar, Child Study Center, New York School of Medicine.

<sup>2</sup> Esther J. Calzada is now at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work.

a racial categorization or the pan-ethnic label of “Latino or Hispanic,” but instead tend to define themselves according to their country of origin/specific ethnicity (García Coll & Marks, 2009; Ruble et al., 2004). Thus in the present study of social identity, we define ethnicity according to country of origin without consideration of race, and we focus on ethnic rather than racial identity because the former is believed to be more salient to Latinos (Quintana, 2007; Smith, 1991).

### Ethnic identity in Latino adolescents

The importance of ethnic identity to youth development is suggested by social psychology, which conceptualizes an individual's view of his or her ethnic group membership as a key aspect of self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In line with social identity theories, ethnic identity has been consistently linked to higher self-esteem in adolescents (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). This literature with pan-Latino samples also shows associations between ethnic identity and other developmental outcomes, including less substance use (Kulis, Marsiglia, Kopak, Olmsted, & Crossman, 2012), better mental health (Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007) and better academic functioning (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Hernandez Jarvis, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), which in some cases appear to be mediated partially by self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007).

Insomuch as girls and boys experience ethnicity differently (Hughes et al., 2006), ethnic identity and its association with youth outcomes are expected to be moderated by child gender. For example, some evidence suggests that boys may be slower in developing their ethnic identities than girls (Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009). In addition, past studies have found unique predictors for the ethnic identity formation of boys relative to girls (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012) and unique protective effects (e.g., against substance use) for boys that did not generalize to girls (Kulis et al., 2012). Beyond the greater social maturity shown by girls (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009), these gender differences are thought to reflect the expectation that the transmission of culture (e.g., traditions, values) across generations is the responsibility of women, and that in preparing girls for this role, parents tend to socialize girls more than boys to cultural practices (Hughes et al., 2006; Kulis et al., 2012; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Crouter, 2006).

### Ethnic identity in early childhood

Little is known about the development of ethnic identity among boys and girls in early childhood. According to cognitive developmental theories, children actively construe their world based on social cues and within the constraints of their cognitive abilities. During early childhood (i.e., 3–7 years old), children are able to engage in symbolic thought and are learning to classify objects and people according to prominent characteristics (Bialystok, 1992). The social identity developmental literature indicates that beginning around age 2, children become aware of social categories such as gender, race and ethnicity (Kohlberg, 1966), marking the beginning of their own social identity development. Over the early childhood years, social identity then unfolds in three developmental stages of self-identification, stability (i.e., unchanging over time) and consistency (i.e., unchanging across situations) that collectively signal the achievement of *constancy*. *Knowledge* and *preferences* specific to one's identity are viewed as components of the multidimensional construct of social identity that emerge once children understand their grouping and its permanence (Ruble et al., 2004). This model has been tested in a number of gender and racial identity studies and show that children between 2 and 7 years old are able to accurately label gender and race; show a basic understanding that these characteristics are immutable; identify group-specific behaviors; and show gender- and racial-based preferences (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Byrd,

2011; Clark & Clark, 1974; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; García Coll et al., 1996; Katz, 2003; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Rhee & Ruble, 1997; Ruble et al., 2004; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005; Serbin & Sprafkin, 1986). Though identity based on ethnicity may emerge later because its social markers are more ambiguous, very limited empirical data regarding when and how children show an understanding of their ethnic identities currently exists. The present study draws on the social identity developmental literature, along with the seminal work of Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, and Cota (1990), to address this gap.

The work of Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, et al. (Bernal et al., 1990; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Ocampo, Bernal, & Knight, 1993; Ocampo, Knight, & Bernal, 1997) with Mexican American children described five components of early (i.e., pre-adolescent) ethnic identity that “reflect a set of self-ideas about one's ethnic group membership” (Bernal et al., 1990, p. 4). This model closely parallels the social identity developmental model in suggesting that once ethnicity is integrated into a child's sense of self, as signaled by the emergence of ethnic *self-identification* and *constancy*, it guides information-processing, leading to the development of ethnic-specific *knowledge*, *behaviors* and *feelings/preferences* (Ocampo et al., 1993). Though not described as stages, the five ethnic identity components were found to emerge at different ages in what the researchers considered a developmental sequencing. From the preschool (4–5 year old) to school-aged (6–10 year old) years, self-identification shifted from an “empty” label (i.e., that is parroted) to a “meaningful” one (i.e., that reflects understanding of why an individual is MA), and the other components shifted from simple imitation of what family members were doing to more complex, individualized knowledge, behaviors and feelings/preferences. Despite the more sophisticated understanding of ethnicity shown by older children, about half of preschoolers were found to self-identify, 37% understood ethnic constancy and 11% showed ethnic knowledge.

Bernal et al.'s model of early ethnic identity (1990; 1993) was groundbreaking in extending social identity theories to ethnic identity development and thus highlighting the feasibility and importance of studying ethnic identity in children. To date, though, it has not been subsequently tested, leaving open the question of whether their original findings are replicable and generalizable to: 1) other samples of Mexican American children and specifically, those being reared in more diverse communities where the salience of ethnicity as a social construct may be higher (Berry, 2004; García Coll & Marks, 2009); and 2) Latino children from other ethnic groups (i.e., countries of origin). To address this question, in the present study we examined the components of ethnic identity proposed by Bernal et al. with Mexican American (MA) and Dominican American (DA) children in New York City (NYC). As noted above, MAs are the largest Latino group in the US, and though they have not historically resided in the Northeast, MAs are poised to become the largest subgroup in NYC by 2021 (Bergad, 2011). The Dominican population has long represented one of the largest subgroups in NYC, where 1 in 5 Latinos is DA. As a well-established group in the area, DAs are more likely to live in ethnic enclaves, to have citizenship status and to speak English, whereas MAs in NYC are more likely to be living in diverse (non-Mexican) communities, to be undocumented and to have limited English skills (Yoshikawa, 2011). These social and historical characteristics define a unique context for children, allowing us to address the extent to which past findings are generalizable to two distinct Latino samples.

### The present study

Ethnic identity in Latino adolescents has garnered attention for its protective effects on academic, mental health and substance use outcomes (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Developmental scientists argue that adolescent outcomes are a function of “early ecological and child factors [that] set in motion a chain of events that unfold, grow and magnify over time into serious problem behavior in adolescence” (Malone &

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6842849>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6842849>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)